

A Passage to India (Walt Whitman)

- Passage to India is a poetry collection published by Walt Whitman in 1871. The first edition was 120 pages long and held seventy-four poems, including twenty-three or twenty-four first published in the collection.
- In the 1881 Leaves of Grass both the poems contained in Passage to India and Two Rivulets were distributed throughout Leaves of Grass.
- The poetry collection's title poem, "Passage to India", was Whitman's last major poem. Whitman wrote it in 1869 after the Suez Canal was first opened. E. M. Forster titled A Passage to India, a 1924 novel, after the poem.
- The title of A Passage to India is a reference to Walt Whitman's poem, "A Passage to India." In the poem, Whitman takes his reader on an imaginary journey through time and space. India is presented as a fabled land that inspired Columbus to seek a westward route from Europe to India, a route that ended up with his discovery of the Americas. While India is celebrated as an antique land, rich in history, America is celebrated as a force of modernization. Whitman sees both as caught up in an inexorable thrust toward globalization, where all countries are swept up in the same push toward progress. As he writes,

Passage to India!

Lo, soul! seest thou not God's purpose from the first?

The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work,

The people to become brothers and sisters,

The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,

The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,

The lands to be welded together. (lines 31-35)

While Whitman is typically exuberant, Forster's novel explores the darker side of what you might call Whitman's Song of My Global Self. Forster's exposé of the costs and contradictions of the British Empire reveal that the dream of "lands [...] welded together" could just be the cynical mantra for taking over other countries. While Whitman uses interracial marriage – "The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage" – as a metaphor for international harmony, Forster's novel shows how even a hint of interracial attraction, let alone friendship, can inflame deep-seated racial animosities.

Whitman ends his poem with an invocation to follow the examples of the great explorers – and the great empire-builders – to go on a "passage beyond," to other fantastic discoveries. But Forster's novel asks us to question the motives behind such a passage, particularly if it entails subjecting entire peoples to the rule of a foreign power.

In 1869, two marvels of engineering altered the course of history forever. That May, the last spike was driven into the ground on the American transcontinental railroad, connecting the country definitively from East to West. Six months later and half a world away, the Suez Canal opened in Egypt. By joining the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea via an artificial waterway, it allowed transportation and trade between Europe and Asia in record time, without navigating around Africa. The canal promised to change the face of world commerce, but it also extended the possibilities of cultural exchange between nations.

Walt Whitman saw the opening of the Suez Canal as both a reason for celebration and an opportunity to connect with the spiritual traditions of faraway lands. In "Passage to India," he celebrates the scientific achievements that made the canal possible, as well as the more esoteric wisdom that could imagine such possibilities, and the new era of worldliness and peace that might come of it.

In the poem's second section, Whitman especially demonstrates his excitement and admiration for the achievement. He opens by attributing the canal to both science ("proud truths of the world") and myth ("and fables of eld"):

*Passage O soul to India!
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic, the primitive fables.
Not you alone, proud truths of the world!
Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science!
But myths and fables of eld—Asia's, Africa's fables
The far-darting beams of the spirit, the unloos'd dreams,
The deep diving bibles and legends,
The daring plots of the poets, the elder religions;*

Though undoubtedly a feat of engineering, the canal was also a triumph of the human imagination. Whitman credits both technology and art here. The "facts of modern science" alone aren't enough to explain the project's completion. By directly addressing the "proud truths" and "fables" side by side with the "far-darting beams of the spirit," "deep diving bibles and legends," and "the daring plots of the poets" (of which his own poem is one), Whitman is able to bring "modern science" into perspective with the "elder religions," and express his admiration for both.

Repetition plays a key role in his praise. Lines four through six employ anaphora by each starting with the word "the," creating a catalog of imagery that accumulates power and momentum as the poem progresses. In each succeeding line, that repetition takes a new form, in Whitman's direct address ("you") to the temples, fables, and towers of foreign lands. It's these exotic institutions ("myths and fables") that Whitman invokes, and which occupy the lion's share of his imagination and attention:

*O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!
O you fables, spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known, mounting to heaven!
You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!
Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!*

Whitman's use of long rhythmic but unmetred and unrhymed lines—the free verse form he developed—allows him to make these observations in a style that's unforced and uncompromised, with the cadence of natural speech. At times his awe feels almost uncontainable, as it's communicated with loftiness and reverence ("O you temples," "O you fables").

The poem's punctuation adds to the building excitement. Though each line ends with an exclamation point, as if Whitman couldn't be more eager to express his joy, the punctuation also contains that eagerness: one end-stopped line refuses to spill over to the next. Each phrase, almost hyperbolic in its sentiments, is lush in its diction. Even when his words border on cliché ("red as roses, burnish'd with gold!"), we sense that Whitman genuinely admires the "lofty and dazzling towers," the fables, and their mystic power.

The syntactic complications also give his argument impact. Because the subject and verb of the extended opening meditation are deferred, we read with anticipation, waiting to see what will happen. By the time the subject and verb of the sentence arrive ("You too I welcome"), the speaker's reverence is clear:

*You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest!
You too with joy I sing.*

Whitman's use of the present tense in the stanza's final line, "You too with joy I sing," implicitly compares poetry to song, and after so many longer lines, its monosyllabic simplicity makes the praise even more immediate.

Whitman extends his praise to Eastern and African "bibles," "religions," and "temples" as much as Western ones ("the same as the rest!"). In his view, every perspective is worth celebrating. That magnanimous sense of inclusion helps make a Whitman poem—including his best-known, "Song of Myself"—so compelling, modern, and relevant to readers even today.

The sense of inclusiveness is ultimately one of the sentiments Whitman is trying to convey here. Turning finally to address the soul, the launching pad for human endeavor, Whitman uses repetition for emphasis once again to give voice to what he sees as God's purpose for the new passage to India—to bring people of all nations and races together:

Passage to India!
Lo, soul! seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by network,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.

When "The earth be spann'd, connected by net-work," barriers are erased, love is nurtured, and people evolve. Whitman is envisioning here not only the actual canal, but the broader implications of a passage to "India"—a place that represents for Whitman, and no doubt many of his American readers, an exotic and foreign land. The literal passage thus becomes a metaphorical one, bridging the continents and allowing for new kinds of communion between people of all nations. Imagining a peaceful new era, Whitman proclaims:

A worship new, I sing;
You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours!
You engineers! You architects, machinists, yours!
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God's name, and for thy sake, O soul.

With his eye fixed on a higher purpose, Whitman addresses all the people who made the canal possible, and implores them to see not just their technological prowess, but the spirituality of their endeavor. (It's interesting to think what Whitman might have written about other modern advances that have since made our world even smaller, like international flight, the telephone, or the Internet.)

Just as the Suez Canal links distant parts of the world, Whitman's poem links ancient religions and modern technology, God and engineering. In doing so, he encourages us to see a bright future, extending an invitation that is both reverent and hopeful.

Summary and Analysis: Passage to India

Whitman was greatly impressed by three great engineering achievements: the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), the laying of the transatlantic undersea cable (1866), and the joining of the Union Pacific and Central Pacific railroads at Utah to produce the nation's first transcontinental railway (1869). These events resulted in improved communication and travel, thus making possible a shorter passage to India. But in

Whitman's poem, the completion of the physical journey to India is only a prelude to the spiritual pathway to India, the East, and, ultimately, to God.

The poet, in section 1, celebrates his time, singing of "the great achievements of the present," and listing "our modern wonders": the opening of the Suez Canal, the building of the great American railroad, and the laying of the transatlantic cable. Yet these achievements of the present have grown out of the past, "the dark unfathom'd retrospect." If the present is great, the past is greater because, like a projectile, the present is "impell'd by the past."

Here Whitman presents the world of physical reality, an antecedent to the world of spiritual reality. The essential idea in emphasizing the three engineering marvels is to indicate man's progress in terms of space. The space-time relationship is at the heart of the matter. The present is significant, but it is only an extension of the past and, therefore, its glories can be traced to times before. Man has mastered space, but he must enrich his spiritual heritage by evoking his past. His achievement in space will remain inadequate unless it is matched, or even surpassed, by his achievement in time and his spiritual values.

In section 2, Whitman envisages a passage to India which is illuminated by "Asiatic" and "primitive" fables. The fables of Asia and Africa are "the far-darting beams of the spirit," and the poet sings of the "deep diving bibles and legends." The spanning of the earth by scientific and technological means is only part of the divine scheme to have "the races, neighbors." The poet, therefore, sings of "a worship new," a spiritual passage to India.

The poet here identifies time with space and merges them in the realm of the spirit. Modern miracles of science are all part of a divine plan, of "God's purpose from the first." Thus the poet sings of a new religion which will combine the scientific achievements of the present with the spiritual attainments of the past.

Man's achievements in communications are shown in the portrayal of "tableaus twain" in section 3. The first tableau, or picture, is the first passage through the Suez Canal "initiated, open'd" by a "procession of steamships." The second picture is the journey of the railway cars "winding along the Platte" River to a junction of the Union and Central Pacific railroads. These two engineering achievements have given concrete shape to the dreams of the "Genoese," Columbus, "centuries after thou art laid in thy grave." Columbus dreamed of "tying the Eastern to the Western sea"; his ideal has now been fulfilled.

The underlying significance of the two events which Whitman describes here is to show that man's material advancement is only a means to his spiritual progress. The poet seems to master the vastness of space through his visionary power. And his thoughts also span time: modern achievements are a realization of Columbus' dream of linking East with West. His discovery of America was only a first step toward finding a shorter passage to India.

Section 4 tells how "many a captain" struggled to reach India. History seems like an underground stream which now and again rises to the surface. Thus Whitman praises Vasco da Gama, who discovered the sea route to India, and who thus accomplished the "purpose vast," the "rondure [rounding] of the world."

This is a tribute to the courage and adventurous spirit of the West in seeking a passage to India. The poet has a vision of history "as a rivulet running," and this dominates his sense of space. History is conceived of as a progression of continuous events which are like a flowing stream. This stream joins the spiritual sea and the poet's vision endows historical happenings with spiritual meaning.

Section 5 presents the spectacle of this earth "swimming in space," endowed with incredible beauty and power. Since the days of Adam and Eve, Whitman says, man has asked the meaning of life: "Who shall soothe these feverish children?/ . . . Who speak the secret of impassive earth?" After the scientists and explorers have achieved their goals, the poet, who is "the true son of God," will forge the links of spiritual union. "Trinitas divine" will be achieved through the visionary power of the poet; he will fuse "Nature and Man."

The earth has been spanned by the efforts of engineers and technicians, Whitman says, and now it is for the poet to bring about the unity of East and West in the realm of the spirit. In his general survey of history, Whitman seems to encompass all time. The poet is the "true son of God" because, in visualizing the union of man and nature, he responds to the divine call within him. He is thus a true explorer and a discoverer of spiritual India.

In section 6, the poet sings of the "marriage of continents." Europe, Asia, Africa, and America are dancing "as brides and bridegrooms hand in hand." The "soothing cradle of man" is India. The poet perceives India as an ancient land of history and legend, morals and religion, adventure and challenge. Brahma and Buddha, Alexander and Tamerlane, Marco Polo and other "traders, rulers, explorers" all shared in its history. "The Admiral himself" (Columbus) is the chief historian. The poet says the culmination of heroic efforts is deferred for a long time. But eventually their seeds will sprout and bloom into a plant that "fills the earth with use and beauty."

Here Whitman has explored the swift passage of time and has invoked the India of Buddha through the present achievement of the linkage of continents by modern technology. The poet thus becomes a time-binder. He also attempts to fuse the familiar with the unfamiliar and the physical with the spiritual. He stands "curious in time," but he also stands outside of time, in eternity, in his spiritual quest.

Section 7 confirms that a passage to India is indeed a journey of the soul "to primal thought." It is not confined to "lands and seas alone." It is a passage back to the Creation, to innocence, "to realms of budding bibles." Whitman is anxious for himself and his soul to begin their journey.

The language of section 7 is highly metaphorical. The return of the poet and his soul to the East is envisaged as a journey back to the cradle of mankind, to the East, where many religions had their birth. It is a journey "back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions." The poet and his soul seek a mystical experience of union with God in the realm of the spirit.

In section 8, the poet and his soul are about to "launch out on trackless seas" and to sail "on waves of ecstasy" singing "our song of God." The soul pleases the poet, and the poet pleases the soul, and they begin their spiritual exploration. They believe in God "but with the mystery of God we dare not dally." They think "silent thoughts, of Time and Space and Death." The poet addresses God as "O Thou transcendent,/ Nameless," as the source of light and cosmic design and a "moral, spiritual fountain." Whitman "shrivels at the thought of God,/At Nature and its wonders," but he expects the soul to bring about a harmonious reconciliation with these forces. When the soul accomplishes its journey and confronts God, it will be as if it had found an older brother. It will finally melt "in fondness in his arms."

The last two sections of this poem are marked by an upsurge of spiritual thought and an ecstatic experience. The poet and his soul, like two lovers, are united in harmony. They seek the mystical experience of union with God. The poet reflects on the nature of God as a transcendental deity. By comprehending God, the poet is enabled to comprehend himself and also man's complex relationship with time, space, and death. The soul is eternal and establishes its relationship with time. The soul is vast and expansive and thus forms a relationship with space. The soul is alive forever and thus conquers death.

In section 8, the poet and his soul together seek to perceive the Divine Reality. Both eagerly await a mystical experience of union with God, of merging with the Divine Being. God is conceived of as a "fountain" or "reservoir" and this image is similar to the basic metaphor of water, which is necessary to nourish the greenery" of Leaves of Grass.

In section 9, the journey which the soul embarks on is a passage to more than India." It is a challenging spiritual journey. Whitman asks the soul if it is ready: "Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?" The passage to the divine shores, to the "aged fierce enigmas," and to the "strangling problems" is filled with difficulty and "skeletons, that, living, never reach'd you" — but it is a thrilling journey. The poet, fired by the spirit of Columbus, is intent on seeking an "immediate passage" because "the blood burns in my veins." He "will risk . . . all" in this bold and thrilling adventure; but actually it is safe enough, for are they not all

the seas of God"? Thus the passage to India — and more — is a journey of man through the seas of God in search of an ideal. It is marked by intense spiritual passion.

This last section presents the final evolution of the symbol of India, which began as a geographical entity and culminated in a timeless craving of man for the realization of God. The words "passage" and "India" both have an evolving symbolic meaning and significance in this richly evocative poem and the growth of their meanings is indirectly the growth of the poem itself.

Summary

'Passage to India' by Walt Whitman describes an imaginary journey that a speaker wants to take into fabled India.

Passage to India begins with a description of the new marvel of the modern world and how they are part of God's plan. These works, the Suez Canal, the great American Railway, and the transatlantic cable allowed men and women to know one another in a new way. He sees India as a mysterious and fabled place that once visited, will allow rejuvenation of his soul. He will return to the birthplace of mankind and be renewed for the rest of his life.

The Passage to India is not easy, many have died on the way. That scares the speaker, but not so much so as to deter him from undertaking the voyage. The pull of exploration is like a current running through the human race and he is a part of it and wants to feel the connectivity of the earth. The speaker also takes the time to mourn the downfall of men, like Columbus, who ended their lives unhappily. He imagines that he is on this important journey with his soul and that the two of them are circumnavigating the earth together.

After asking himself if he is ready to go further on his journey, the reply is an eventual yes and he commands the anchor to be lifted. While the voyage might seem like a terrifying one, he is protected by God.

Themes

Whitman engages with themes that include exploration, expansion, and the future throughout 'Passage to India'. While the title suggests that the poem is focused on India as a place of exploration that's not the case. It is a metaphor for the larger world of possibilities that opens up as humanity expands its capabilities and the desire to look into the past. Whitman is interested in the future, the past, what lies ahead for the human race, and all of time that humanity has left behind.

The poem touches on the power of freedom and of being able to reach out and touch whatever is coming next. Whitman also speaks about the value of myths and fables and how they are as important to his speaker as science.

Structure and Form

'Passage to India' by Walt Whitman is divided into thirteen sections of varying lengths. As is the case with all of Whitman's verse, he chose not to make sure of a specific rhyme scheme or metrical pattern. He is known as the father of free verse poetry and this poem is no exception. The stanzas all vary in the number of lines they're composed of and the length of those lines. Throughout Whitman mostly uses end-punctuation with only a few examples of enjambment.

Literary Devices

Despite being written in free verse, Whitman makes use of several literary devices in 'Passage to India'. These include but are not limited to alliteration, imagery, anaphora, and enjambment. The latter, enjambment, is a common literary device that is seen through the transition between lines. For example, the

transition between lines five and six of the fourth section. Anaphora is a form of repetition. It appears very clearly in the first lines of the poem where the word “Singing” starts the first three lines. Another good example is in the first stanza of section three in which six of the lines start with “The”.

Analysis of Passage to India

Section 1

*Singing my days,
Singing the great achievements of the present,
Singing the strong, light works of engineers,
Our modern wonders, (the antique ponderous Seven outvied,)
In the Old World, the east, the Suez canal,
The New by its mighty railroad spann'd,
The seas inlaid with eloquent, gentle wires,
I sound, to commence, the cry, with thee, O soul,
The Past! the Past! the Past!
The Past! the dark, unfathom'd retrospect!
The teeming gulf! the sleepers and the shadows!
The past! the infinite greatness of the past!
For what is the present, after all, but a growth out of the past?
(As a projectile, form'd, impell'd, passing a certain line, still keeps on,
So the present, utterly form'd, impell'd by the past.)*

In the first stanza of Passage to India, before his travels begin, the speaker is describing joyously, the “achievements” of the present time. He is celebrating the “strong, light works of engineers” who are responsible for what he considers, “modern wonders” that outshine the seven ancient wonders of the world.

The three “wonders” that the speaker is so excited about are the “Suez Canal” in the “Old World” of Egypt, the “mighty railroad,” or the great American railroad in the “New” world and finally the transatlantic cable that connected “the seas.”

The second stanza of this section celebrates the past for the part it played in spawning the present. It is described as “The teeming gulf, “the infinite greatness,” and as playing host to the “sleepers and the shadows.”

The past is mysterious in its own unknowable darkness and is nothing if not the place from which the present grows. The present is like a “projectile” that is sent into the future by the past, it continues on without end for all of time. There will always be a present moment spawned by the past.

Section 2

*Passage, O soul, to India!
Eclaircise the myths Asiatic—the primitive fables.
Not you alone, proud truths of the world!
Nor you alone, ye facts of modern science!
But myths and fables of eld—Asia's, Africa's fables!
The far-darting beams of the spirit!—the unloos'd dreams!
The deep diving bibles and legends;
The daring plots of the poets—the elder religions;
—O you temples fairer than lilies, pour'd over by the rising sun!
O you fables, spurning the known, eluding the hold of the known,
 mounting to heaven!
You lofty and dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!
Towers of fables immortal, fashion'd from mortal dreams!
You too I welcome, and fully, the same as the rest;
You too with joy I sing.*

The second section begins with a description of the speaker's envisioned passage to India. This trip is enhanced by the speaker's assumptions of what the "Asiatic" will be like. He is well read in its "fables."

This stanza is used to make sure the reader understands that the passage that the narrator is undertaking is one that is illuminated by the modern marvels of the world as well as the ancient legends and stories. It is equally important to recognize the "far-darting beams of the spirit" and the "deep diving bibles and legends". These stories of the East provide one with a spiritual guide on one's travels. They are as necessary "as the rest."

These stories, just like the physical sights the narrator will see, are beautiful. They are of "temples fairer than lilies" that are washed by the "rising sun" and of "dazzling towers, pinnacled, red as roses, burnish'd with gold!"

Section 3

Passage to India!

*Lo, soul! seest thou not God's purpose from the first?
The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work,
The people to become brothers and sisters,
The races, neighbors, to marry and be given in marriage,
The oceans to be cross'd, the distant brought near,
The lands to be welded together.*

(A worship new, I sing;

*You captains, voyagers, explorers, yours!
You engineers! you architects, machinists, your!
You, not for trade or transportation only,
But in God's name, and for thy sake, O soul.)*

The speaker is asking the reader, and his own soul, whether it is understood that God's purpose is in the connections the world is making. It is part of his plan that "The earth...be spann'd" and that "people...become brothers and sisters." He wants all types of people to intermingle, marry, and become neighbors. The oceans are meant to be "cross'd [and] the distant brought near / the lands to be welded together."

In the joyous song and poem that the speaker is singing he "worships" the creators and "voyagers" who made these technological marvels a reality. He worships them for their works and for the way in which they have helped to complete God's plan.

Section 4

Passage to India!

*Lo, soul, for thee, of tableaux twain,
I see, in one, the Suez canal initiated, open'd,
I see the procession of steamships, the Empress Eugenie's leading the van;
I mark, from on deck, the strange landscape, the pure sky, the level sand
in the distance;
I pass swiftly the picturesque groups, the workmen gather'd,
The gigantic dredging machines.
In one, again, different, (yet thine, all thine, O soul, the same,)
I see over my own continent the Pacific Railroad, surmounting every barrier;
I see continual trains of cars winding along the Platte, carrying freight
and passengers;
I hear the locomotives rushing and roaring, and the shrill steam-whistle,
I hear the echoes reverberate through the grandest scenery in the world;*

*I cross the Laramie plains—I note the rocks in grotesque shapes—the buttes;
 I see the plentiful larkspur and wild onions—the barren, colorless,
 sage-deserts;
 I see in glimpses afar, or towering immediately above me, the great mountains—
 I see the Wind River and the Wahsatch mountains;
 I see the Monument mountain and the Eagle’s Nest—I pass the Promontory—
 I ascend the Nevadas;
 I scan the noble Elk mountain, and wind around its base;
 I see the Humboldt range—I thread the valley and cross the river,
 I see the clear waters of Lake Tahoe—I see forests of majestic pines,
 Or, crossing the great desert, the alkaline plains, I behold enchanting mirages
 of waters and meadows;
 Marking through these, and after all, in duplicate slender lines,
 Bridging the three or four thousand miles of land travel,
 Tying the Eastern to the Western sea,
 The road between Europe and Asia.
 (Ah Genoese, thy dream! thy dream!
 Centuries after thou art laid in thy grave,
 The shore thou foundest verifies thy dream!)*

The fourth section is the longest so far, and in the first stanza the speaker is bearing witness to the first crossing of the Suez Canal. He can see the “steamships” that are moving through the water and the “Empress Eugenie’s” ship who was leading the procession.

It appears that the speaker is actually aboard one of these steamships and from his position “on deck” can see the “strange landscape” of Egypt “in the distance.” He passes by the workmen who are still building and the “gigantic...machines” that were used to dredge the canal.

In another “tableau,” or scene, the narrator is back in America, and is looking out over the “Pacific Railroad and seeing it’s continual “trains of cars” that carry passengers. The “locomotives” are “shrilly” whistling and echoing across the plains. The speaker is crossing the country along with the train and can see the “colorless, sage-deserts” and the mountains in the distance. As he crosses the desert he beholds “enchanting mirages / of waters and meadows” that are marked through “in duplicated slender lines”

Section 5

*Passage to India!
 Struggles of many a captain—tales of many a sailor dead!
 Over my mood, stealing and spreading they come,
 Like clouds and cloudlets in the unreach’d sky.
 Along all history, down the slopes,
 As a rivulet running, sinking now, and now again to the surface rising,
 A ceaseless thought, a varied train—Lo, soul! to thee, thy sight, they rise,
 The plans, the voyages again, the expeditions:
 Again Vasco de Gama sails forth;
 Again the knowledge gain’d, the mariner’s compass,
 Lands found, and nations born—thou born, America, (a hemisphere unborn,)
 For purpose vast, man’s long probation fill’d,
 Thou, rondure of the world, at last accomplish’d.*

The speaker tells of how exploration runs like a “rivulet” through time. It sinks and rises but is always there. It will “again” be as it was when “de Gama” was sailing. Knowledge will be “gain’d,” new lands found and “nations born,” just as America was.

Section 6

*O, vast Rondure, swimming in space!
 Cover'd all over with visible power and beauty!
 Alternate light and day, and the teeming, spiritual darkness;
 Unspeakable, high processions of sun and moon, and countless stars, above;
 Below, the manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees;
 With inscrutable purpose—some hidden, prophetic intention;
 Now, first, it seems, my thought begins to span thee.
 Down from the gardens of Asia, descending, radiating,
 Adam and Eve appear, then their myriad progeny after them,
 Wandering, yearning, curious—with restless explorations,
 With questionings, baffled, formless, feverish—with never-happy hearts,
 With that sad, incessant refrain, Wherefore, unsatisfied Soul? and
 Whither, O mocking Life?
 Ah, who shall soothe these feverish children?
 Who justify these restless explorations?
 Who speak the secret of impassive Earth?
 Who bind it to us? What is this separate Nature, so unnatural?
 What is this Earth, to our affections? (unloving earth, without a throb to answer ours;
 Cold earth, the place of graves.)
 Yet, soul, be sure the first intent remains—and shall be carried out;
 (Perhaps even now the time has arrived.)
 After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already cross'd,)
 After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
 After the noble inventors—after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
 Finally shall come the Poet, worthy that name;
 The true Son of God shall come, singing his songs.
 Then, not your deeds only, O voyagers, O scientists and inventors, shall be
 justified,
 All these hearts, as of fretted children, shall be sooth'd,
 All affection shall be fully responded to—the secret shall be told;
 All these separations and gaps shall be taken up, and hook'd and link'd together;
 The whole Earth—this cold, impassive, voiceless Earth, shall be completely
 justified;
 Trinitas divine shall be gloriously accomplish'd and compacted by the Son
 of God, the poet,
 (He shall indeed pass the straits and conquer the mountains,
 He shall double the Cape of Good Hope to some purpose;)
 Nature and Man shall be disjoin'd and diffused no more,
 The true Son of God shall absolutely fuse them.*

This section begins with the poet describing the lands of America. There are “manifold grass and waters, animals, mountains, trees.” It seems to the speaker as if there is some “inscrutable purpose” to it all. His thoughts have moved from America to the lands of Asia where he believes all life began. It stimulates in him a desire for “Wandering, yearning [and] restless explorations.” Where is it, he says, that the soul is longing to go? And who will be able to soothe those that desire travel?

Towards the end of this section the poet comes to the conclusion that only after the world has been completely explored shall the “true Song of God...come, singing his songs. It is at this time that the “hearts” of the wanderers shall be sated and “All affection shall be fully responded to.” The whole world, and all it's parts will be “completely justified.” There will be a unity between “Nature and Man.

Section 7

*Year at whose open'd, wide-flung door I sing!
 Year of the purpose accomplish'd!*

*Year of the marriage of continents, climates and oceans!
(No mere Doge of Venice now, wedding the Adriatic;)
I see, O year, in you, the vast terraqueous globe, given, and giving all,
Europe to Asia, Africa join'd, and they to the New World;
The lands, geographies, dancing before you, holding a festival garland,
As brides and bridegrooms hand in hand.*

In this stanza the poet is envisioning what it must be like in the East now that the world is more connected. There has been a “marriage of continents, climates and oceans.” All parts of the world from “Europe to Asia, [and] Africa join’d” and all of them “the New World.” The stories and lands are becoming one in what the speaker sees as a symbolic marriage ceremony.

Section 8

*Passage to India!
Cooling airs from Caucasus far, soothing cradle of man,
The river Euphrates flowing, the past lit up again.
Lo, soul, the retrospect, brought forward;
The old, most populous, wealthiest of Earth's lands,
The streams of the Indus and the Ganges, and their many affluents;
(I, my shores of America walking to-day, behold, resuming all,)
The tale of Alexander, on his warlike marches, suddenly dying,
On one side China, and on the other side Persia and Arabia,
To the south the great seas, and the Bay of Bengal;
The flowing literatures, tremendous epics, religions, castes,
Old occult Brahma, interminably far back—the tender and junior Buddha,
Central and southern empires, and all their belongings, possessors,
The wars of Tamerlane, the reign of Aurungzebe,
The traders, rulers, explorers, Moslems, Venetians, Byzantium, the Arabs, Portuguese,
The first travelers, famous yet, Marco Polo, Batouta the Moor,
Doubts to be solv'd, the map incognita, blanks to be fill'd,
The foot of man unstay'd, the hands never at rest,
Thyself, O soul, that will not brook a challenge.*

The journey that the poet is on, returning to the East, is one of a deeply spiritual nature. He sees it as a return to the “soothing cradle of man” where everything began.

The poet speaks on all the other explorers of these lands, like Marco Polo and Alexander. These men discovered “tremendous epics, religions, castes.” They saw the “tender and junior Buddha.” All manner of traders have come there over time from Venetian to the Arabs and Portuguese. Exploring is ingrained in humankind, anytime there are “doubts to be solv’d” or “blanks to be fill’d” men will never rest.

Section 9

*The medieval navigators rise before me,
The world of 1492, with its awaken'd enterprise;
Something swelling in humanity now like the sap of the earth in spring,
The sunset splendor of chivalry declining.
And who art thou, sad shade?
Gigantic, visionary, thyself a visionary,
With majestic limbs, and pious, beaming eyes,
Spreading around, with every look of thine, a golden world,
Enhuing it with gorgeous hues.
As the chief historian,
Down to the footlights walks, in some great scene,
Dominating the rest, I see the Admiral himself,*

*(History's type of courage, action, faith;)
Behold him sail from Palos, leading his little fleet;
His voyage behold—his return—his great fame,
His misfortunes, calumniators—behold him a prisoner, chain'd,
Behold his dejection, poverty, death.
(Curious, in time, I stand, noting the efforts of heroes;
Is the deferment long? bitter the slander, poverty, death?
Lies the seed unreck'd for centuries in the ground? Lo! to God's due occasion,
Uprising in the night, it sprouts, blooms,
And fills the earth with use and beauty.)*

From his spiritual and mental position, the specter of all those has come before he greets his travels. He thinks of 1492 when Columbus first landed in America and how that discovery awakened the world, but that time is dying.

The speaker now directly addresses the nations of the world who no longer have the gusto they once had for exploration. He sees them as being “sad shades” that were once visionaries. Of these visionaries, one dominated the rest, Columbus. He sailed from “Palos, leading his little fleet” and returned to “great fame” but also men who told falsehoods about him that lead to his “dejection, poverty, death.”

From his spot in time he can stand and look back on “the efforts of heroes” and how that effort he hopes is going to be reborn today in modern explorers like himself.

Section 10

*Passage indeed, O soul, to primal thought!
Not lands and seas alone—thy own clear freshness,
The young maturity of brood and bloom;
To realms of budding bibles.
O soul, repressless, I with thee, and thou with me,
Thy circumnavigation of the world begin;
Of man, the voyage of his mind's return,
To reason's early paradise,
Back, back to wisdom's birth, to innocent intuitions,
Again with fair Creation.*

Once more the speaker reiterates that this passage is one that will return him to “primal thought.” It is not only the lands and seas that he is hoping to see but also a “clear freshness” of mind. He wants to mellow his “young maturity” with the “realms of budding bibles.”

He then speaks directly to himself, saying that he and his soul are embarking on a “circumnavigation of the world.” It is a voyage of the mind seeking to return to where it came from, “back to wisdom's birth” and “fair Creation”

Section 11

*O we can wait no longer!
We too take ship, O soul!
Joyous, we too launch out on trackless seas!
Fearless, for unknown shores, on waves of extasy to sail,
Amid the wafting winds, (thou pressing me to thee, I thee to me, O soul,)
Caroling free—singing our song of God,
Chanting our chant of pleasant exploration.
With laugh, and many a kiss,
(Let others deprecate—let others weep for sin, remorse, humiliation;)*

*O soul, thou pleasest me—I thee.
 Ah, more than any priest, O soul, we too believe in God;
 But with the mystery of God we dare not dally.
 O soul, thou pleasest me—I thee;
 Sailing these seas, or on the hills, or waking in the night,
 Thoughts, silent thoughts, of Time, and Space, and Death, like waters flowing,
 Bear me, indeed, as through the regions infinite,
 Whose air I breathe, whose ripples hear—lave me all over;
 Bathe me, O God, in thee—mounting to thee,
 I and my soul to range in range of thee.
 O Thou transcendant!
 Nameless—the fibre and the breath!
 Light of the light—shedding forth universes—thou centre of them!
 Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving!
 Thou moral, spiritual fountain! affection's source! thou reservoir!
 (O pensive soul of me! O thirst unsatisfied! waitest not there?
 Waitest not haply for us, somewhere there, the Comrade perfect?)
 Thou pulse! thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
 That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
 Athwart the shapeless vastnesses of space!
 How should I think—how breathe a single breath—how speak—if, out of myself,
 I could not launch, to those, superior universes?
 Swiftly I shrivel at the thought of God,
 At Nature and its wonders, Time and Space and Death,
 But that I, turning, call to thee, O soul, thou actual Me,
 And lo! thou gently masterest the orbs,
 Thou matest Time, smilest content at Death,
 And fillest, swellest full, the vastnesses of Space.
 Greater than stars or suns,
 Bounding, O soul, thou journeyest forth;
 —What love, than thine and ours could wider amplify?
 What aspirations, wishes, outvie thine and ours, O soul?
 What dreams of the ideal? what plans of purity, perfection, strength?
 What cheerful willingness, for others' sake, to give up all?
 For others' sake to suffer all?
 Reckoning ahead, O soul, when thou, the time achiev'd,
 (The seas all cross'd, weather'd the capes, the voyage done,)
 Surrounded, copest, frontest God, yieldest, the aim attain'd,
 As, fill'd with friendship, love complete, the Elder Brother found,
 The Younger melts in fondness in his arms.*

In the eleventh section of the poem, the narrator is describing how he can wait no longer. He wants to “launch out on trackless seas” where he, and the others on his voyage, can sing their “song of God.”

While sailings, the travelers will “laugh” and “kiss” while the other people left onshore will be stuck in “sin, remorse, humiliation.” On this voyage, he is going to be gaining wisdom and pleasure from his soul, and during his silent thoughts, he will consider “Time, and Space, and Death.” He will be carried through “infinite” regions of the earth and breathe their air. His spirit will be bathed in God and his soul will be lifted to God-like proportions.

He continues on to lavish praise on God and to tell of God’s “moral, spiritual fountain.” He is the center of everything. Knowing these things about God and about the world, how could the speaker stay where he was and not go out to see “those, superior universes?”

He concludes this section by imagining a time in the future, after his travels, during which he will be able to help others. He will “fill’d with friendship,” like an “Elder Brother,” take the “Younger,” (anyone in need), into “his arms.”

Section 12

Passage to more than India!

Are thy wings plumed indeed for such far flights?

O Soul, voyagest thou indeed on voyages like these?

Disportest thou on waters such as these?

Soudest below the Sanscrit and the Vedas?

Then have thy bent unleash’d.

Passage to you, your shores, ye aged fierce enigmas!

Passage to you, to mastership of you, ye strangling problems!

You, strew’d with the wrecks of skeletons, that, living, never reach’d you.

Once more speaking to himself, the poet is questioning his readiness to undertake such a voyage. He wants to know if his “soul” is strong enough for “such far flights” and “voyages like these.” It seems that the answer is yes as he is once more reinvigorated and pining for the danger that awaits on new lands and on waters in which many were unable to pass.

Section 13

Passage to more than India!

O secret of the earth and sky!

Of you, O waters of the sea! O winding creeks and rivers!

Of you, O woods and fields! Of you, strong mountains of my land!

Of you, O prairies! Of you, gray rocks!

O morning red! O clouds! O rain and snows!

O day and night, passage to you!

O sun and moon, and all you stars! Sirius and Jupiter!

Passage to you!

Passage—immediate passage! the blood burns in my veins!

Away, O soul! hoist instantly the anchor!

Cut the hawsers—haul out—shake out every sail!

Have we not stood here like trees in the ground long enough?

Have we not grovell’d here long enough, eating and drinking like mere brutes?

Have we not darken’d and dazed ourselves with books long enough?

Sail forth! steer for the deep waters only!

Reckless, O soul, exploring, I with thee, and thou with me;

For we are bound where mariner has not yet dared to go,

And we will risk the ship, ourselves and all.

O my brave soul!

O farther, farther sail!

O daring joy, but safe! Are they not all the seas of God?

O farther, farther, farther sail!

In the final section of the poem the speaker reiterates the emotional and spiritual reasons he has for traveling to India. It is more than a “Passage” it is a journey to rediscover the “waters of the sea” and the “strong mountains of my land.” As he discusses these parts of the world he wishes them well saying, “passage to you!”

The speaker is completely prepared for his journey and is happily asking that the anchor be raised immediately and that the boat “shake out every sail!” He asks if they, the human race, has not stood in the same spot for long enough like “mere brutes.” It is time to forget about the books and to “Sail forth!” They are bound, like the explorers of old, for the places that have never been visited.

No matter how far they go the voyage will be safe as it is conducted on God's seas.

Similar Poems

While Whitman's 'Passage to India' is not about conventional exploration, there are many parallels that can be drawn between his work and some of the more traditional poems about wandering, journeys, and expansion. These include 'Sea-Fever' by John Maesfield which describes the poet's longing to go to sea and Whitman's own 'Song of the Open Road'. The latter, like 'Passage to India,' is about a journey to an undefined destination. Whitman describes his speaker's longing to take a trip in order to learn more about himself. Last, readers should also take a look at 'Questions of Travel' by Elizabeth Bishop in which the poet argues with herself about the pros and cons of traveling.
